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Al Qaeda after the Iraq Conflict

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Summary

The May 12, 2003, suicide bombings of three Western housing compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia reopened questions about the strength and viability of Al Qaeda in the post-Iraq conflict environment. The apprehension of a number of senior Al Qaeda leaders in recent months, combined with the absence of major terrorist attacks during the military campaign in Iraq, had led some to believe that Al Qaeda was severely crippled and unable to launch major attacks. Others argued that the organization was in transition to a more decentralized structure, had gained new recruits, and might even be a growing threat. This report analyzes current viewpoints about the state of Al Qaeda and the threat it poses to the United States. It will be updated as events warrant.

The May 12, 2003, bombings of three Western housing compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia marked an apparent evolution in the behavior of Al Qaeda that some experts believe provides insight into the viability of the organization after the U.S. military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although there has been important, measurable progress in the United States' efforts against Al Qaeda since September 11th, experts disagree as to whether the organization as a whole presents a greater or lesser threat to the United States and its interests today. At the heart of the analysis is the question of whether Al Qaeda can launch additional major attacks of strategic impact or whether the organization is now largely relegated to low level tactical attacks. In the wake of the Riyadh bombings, this report examines the debate about how to assess Al Qaeda's strength and will explain the major points on which experts differ, as well as the assumptions underlying their arguments.

The attack in Saudi Arabia was not the first recent incident to display suspected links to Al Qaeda. Beginning in 2002, Al Qaeda reportedly either contributed to or participated directly in a number of wide-ranging attacks, including against a passenger plane and hotel in Kenya (in which 15 were killed and 40 injured), a night club in Indonesia (where about 180 were killed), a French oil tanker off the coast of Yemen (in which one crewman was killed and four injured), and a synagogue in Tunisia (where 19 were killed and 22

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injured).¹ A number of other potential Al Qaeda operations were successfully disrupted.² The organization is still considered dangerous, and the Bush Administration has been warning of the likelihood of additional terrorist attacks for many months.³

But the absence of major terrorist incidents during the Iraq war had led to a degree of optimism even among those who believed that Al Qaeda's terrorism had not ended. Osama bin Laden, in an audiotape released April 7, 2003, urged his followers to mount suicide attacks "to avenge the innocent children...assassinated in Iraq." On some previous occasions, such public declarations had been followed by major events. When those attacks did not occur after bin Laden's April statement, their absence was seen as a possible indicator of the organization's weakness. Although intelligence officials cautioned that Al Qaeda was still capable of mounting significant attacks, there was a sense that U.S. counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda had severely damaged the organization. Cofer Black, head of the State Department's counterterrorism office, was quoted in early May 2003 saying, "This was the big game for them — you put up or shut up and they have failed. It proves that the global war on terrorism has been effective, focused and has got these guys on the run."⁴

The attacks in Saudi Arabia, as well as subsequent explosions in Morocco, seem to have tempered that optimism, not just because they occurred (U.S. officials had consistently argued that future attacks were inevitable and had even warned of a heightened security threat to Saudi Arabia) but because the Riyadh bombings in particular displayed specific characteristics that worried terrorism experts. Before then, the selection of targets since 9/11 seemed to indicate that the U.S. assault on Al Qaeda had forced it to shift to opportunistic "soft" targets, especially tourist destinations in areas of the world that were relatively unfortified against terrorist attacks. The Riyadh attacks were more sophisticated. The perpetrators reportedly used high quality explosives, engaged in multiple coordinated attacks, carried out long-term reconnaissance, and attacked well-fortified targets.⁵ They also used large suicide assault teams to kill the guards and breach the existing fortifications, a seeming tactical innovation.⁶ These characteristics, potentially reflective of enduring, advanced operational capability, caused

¹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003*, pp. 118-119. Also accessible at [<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/>].

² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³ See, for example, George Tenet, DCI's Worldwide Threat Briefing (As Prepared for Delivery), "The Worldwide Threat in 2003: Evolving Dangers in a Complex World," February 11, 2003; accessed at [http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/dci_speech_02112003.html] on May 16, 2003.

⁴ Walter Pincus and Dana Priest, "Spy Agencies' Optimism On Al Qaeda Is Growing: Lack of Attacks Thought to Show Group Is Nearly Crippled," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2003, p. A16.

⁵ Josh Meyer, "Attack in Saudi Arabia; Al Qaeda May Be Back, And Stronger; Strikes in Saudi Arabia underscore how little is now known about the group and its members," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2003, p. A1; and Don Van Natta, Jr., and Neil MacFarquhar, "3 Qaeda Cells Are Operating In Saudi Arabia, Officials Say," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2003, p. A17.

⁶ Michael Elliott, "Why the War on Terror Will Never End: Bomb attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca suggest that even on the run, Al-Qaeda is a resilient threat to the West," *Time*, May 18, 2003; accessed at [<http://www.time.com>] on May 19, 2003.

some experts to reassess their understanding of how Al Qaeda is evolving as an organization in the post-Iraq conflict environment.

The Characteristics of Al Qaeda

There is a great deal that remains unknown or debatable about the specific nature, size, structure and reach of the organization, despite many years of studying it. For example, Western experts are not exactly sure how many members it has now or has had in the past. Estimates are often based upon an approximation of how many people trained in Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and Sudan. The estimates range as high as 60,000⁷ and as low as 20,000.⁸ These assessments are inexact in part because the total number of camps that operated is not firmly agreed.⁹ But even if experts knew the correct total number of camps and trainees, not all the people who took the training necessarily became (or remained) actual members of the organization.¹⁰ The State Department estimates that Al Qaeda “probably has several thousand members and associates.”¹¹ But since these are all estimates, it is not known what proportion of Al Qaeda members U.S. and allied forces have captured or killed.¹²

But do operatives even necessarily need to be members? It is apparent from some of those apprehended in failed plots that it is not essential to be formally “in” Al Qaeda in order to carry out attacks. Operatives seem to vary, from the best-trained, controlled and financed professional cadres, such as Mohammed Atta (who led the September 11th attacks), to less-trained and relatively uncontrolled volunteers, such as Ahmed Ressam (who intended to blow up Los Angeles International Airport) and Richard Reid (who tried to detonate plastic explosives in his shoes aboard an American Airlines transatlantic flight).¹³ Al Qaeda even acts like a foundation at times, reportedly giving grants to existing local terrorist groups who present “promising” plans for attacks that serve the organization’s general goals.¹⁴ Unlike many traditional terrorist groups, Al Qaeda has no single standard operating procedure, although it does have a well-developed manual for

⁷ German intelligence cited in The Atlantic Online, “Atlantic Unbound: Terrorism’s CEO,” interview with Peter Bergen, accessed at <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2002-01-09> on May 16, 2003.

⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 2002-2003* (Oxford University Press, May 2003), p. 9.

⁹ Anonymous, *Through our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam and the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 2002), pp. 126, 130-131, and passim.

¹⁰ Also, Al Qaeda has no clear membership standards, a problem that further complicates any efforts by outsiders to determine membership status. See David Johnson and Don Van Natta, Jr., “U.S. Officials See Signs of a Revived Al Qaeda,” *The New York Times*, 17 May 2003, p. A6.

¹¹ *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*, p. 119.

¹² For much more information about the origins of Al Qaeda and the nature of the membership, see Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); and Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes*.

¹³ Bruce Hoffman, “The Leadership Secrets of Osama bin Laden: The terrorist as CEO,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2003, pp. 26-27.

¹⁴ Such plots have been disrupted in Jordan, Italy, and Singapore. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

its operations. Benefitting from Osama bin Laden's considerable experience in business, the organization is said to be structured like a modern corporation, reflective of management concepts of the early 1990s, including bottom-up and top-down networks, a common "mission statement," and entrepreneurial thinking even at the lowest levels. This makes it extraordinarily flexible and, many believe, able to survive serious blows.¹⁵

Al Qaeda has also developed strong ties to other terrorist organizations, some new and some long-standing.¹⁶ Osama bin Laden formed an umbrella group in late 1998, "The International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," which included not only Al Qaeda, but also groups from Egypt, Algeria, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Some argue that Al Qaeda has been something of a hybrid terrorist organization for some time.¹⁷ A sampling of groups currently thought to be connected includes the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Philippines), Jemaah Islamiyah (Southeast Asia), Egyptian Islamic Jihad (merged with Al Qaeda in 2001), Al-ansar Mujahidin (Chechnya), al-Gamaa al-Islamiya (Egypt, and has a worldwide presence), Abu Sayyaf (Philippines), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Harakat ul-Mujahidin (Pakistan/Kashmir). The list is illustrative, not comprehensive. Some experts see increased reliance on connections to other groups as a sign of Al Qaeda's weakness; others point to enhanced cooperation with other groups as a worrisome indicator of strength, especially with groups that formerly focused on local issues and now display evidence of convergence on Al Qaeda's international anti-U.S., anti-West agenda. An important question is whether Al Qaeda might be evolving further into a new form, more like a movement than a formal organization, increasingly diffuse internationally and less reliant upon its own membership.

Organization in Transition

Clearly Al Qaeda is in transition. Whether that transition will lead to something more or less dangerous is a point of contention. On one hand, clear progress in apprehending or killing senior leaders of Al Qaeda has been evident. In recent weeks, President Bush announced that the United States has captured about half the senior leadership;¹⁸ other sources claim that about a third have been captured.¹⁹ Many of these terrorist leaders have been crucial participants in past Al Qaeda attacks; the arrests of September 11 plotter and third-in-command Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and operations chief Abu Zubaydah, for example, are believed to have hurt the organization and disrupted its operations. According to U.S. officials, the organization's previous

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁶ For further information, see CRS Report RL31119, *Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors*, 2002. February 13, 2002, by Kenneth Katzman.

¹⁷ David Johnston, don Van Natta, Jr., and Judith Miller, "Qaeda's New Links Increase Threats From Far-Flung Sites," *The New York Times*, 16 June 2002, p. A1.

¹⁸ "President Bush Announces Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended," Remarks by the President from the USS Abraham Lincoln At Sea Off the Coast of San Diego, California, May 1, 2003, accessed at [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/iraq/20030501-15.html>] on May 16, 2003.

¹⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey, 2002-2003*; and Bruce Hoffman, "The Leadership Secrets of Osama bin Laden: The terrorist as CEO," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2003, p. 26.

communications network has apparently been crippled, its leaders are on the run, and its Afghanistan base has been largely eliminated.²⁰

Still, Al Qaeda is not like a state, whose regime you can remove in order to disable it. Counterterrorism officials describe it more as an organic structure that adapts to changing circumstances, including the loss of some senior leaders. The two most senior leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, are widely believed to be alive and at large, and terrorism experts argue over the extent to which a succession plan is in effect to replace those who have been captured.²¹ During the week before the Riyadh attacks, email interviews conducted by the London-based magazine *Al Majalla* apparently with Al Qaeda spokesman Thabet bin Qais claimed that Al Qaeda had undertaken a thorough restructuring of its leadership.²² One of the worrisome aspects of the attack itself was the apparent involvement of people thought to have been lower-level fighters who may have now stepped into the breach. For example, Khaled Jehani, who was previously considered a low-level operative, seems to have been involved in the Riyadh operation.²³ Also mentioned is Seif al-Adel, one of a number of younger Al Qaeda members who seem to have gained influence in the absence of former leaders and who may have played a role.²⁴ Many worry that this could illustrate an evolution within Al Qaeda to a new generation.²⁵ This, as well as other evidence in the attack itself, seems to demonstrate a level of central direction. Finally, some believe that there has been a spike in recruitment to the network as a result of the U.S. military operations in Iraq, leading to a worry that, despite its serious recent losses, Al Qaeda could grow stronger in future months.²⁶

Stronger or Weaker?

Ultimately, the debate about Al Qaeda's current status centers on the important question of whether it is growing or declining in strength. In the wake of the Afghanistan and Iraq military campaigns, when the predicted terrorist attacks on the United States and its interests did not materialize, what is the current level of threat to the United States?

Most believe that the denial of safe havens and arrests of senior leaders have seriously crippled the organization when judged by its earlier form. However, it may be

²⁰ Robert Schlesinger, "A dispersed Qaeda still poses threat: Turns to attacks of smaller scale, specialists say," *The Boston Globe*, 18 May 2003, p. A1.

²¹ Hoffman, p. 26.

²² "Report: New Threat From Al Qaeda," CBSNews.com, accessed at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/05/05/attack/main552329.shtml> on 20 May 2003.

²³ Dana Priest and Dan Eggen, "U.S. Expects More Strikes By Al Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, 16 May 2003, p. A1.

²⁴ David Johnson and Don Van Natta, Jr., "U.S. Officials See Signs of a Revived Al Qaeda," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2003, p. A6; and Don Van Natta, Jr., and Neil MacFarquhar, "3 Qaeda Cells Are Operating In Saudi Arabia, Officials Say," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2003, p. A17. Some reports, however, place Adel under arrest in Iran.

²⁵ Johnson and Van Natta, Jr., "U.S. Officials See Signs of a Revived Al Qaeda," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2003, p. A6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

evolving into something new. For terrorist groups, periods of evolution can be particularly dangerous. Organizations in transition can be especially vulnerable to disruption and destruction, but they can also be less predictable and prone to lash out in order to cause additional damage, rally flagging supporters, and/or prove their continuing viability.²⁷ With respect to Al Qaeda, evidence of new sophisticated operations, a possible succession plan in action, central coordination of attacks, and growing international ties, all increasingly converging on a common international agenda hostile to the United States and its allies, may give U.S. officials new reason for concern. In the short term at least, even successes in counterterrorist operations against a more decentralized organization can lead to greater difficulty in collecting reliable intelligence, as the paths of communication are increasingly unfamiliar, the personalities are changing, and the locations of operatives are more diffuse. While the long term trajectory is very difficult to assess, for the time being it seems that Al Qaeda (or its successors) has emerged from a period of inactivity and remains a very serious threat, requiring concentrated attention and vigorous countermeasures on the part of its prospective targets.

Issues for Congress

Congress may face a number of questions in the coming months. These include: How does U.S. counterterrorism policy need to adapt to match the changing threat of Al Qaeda and its associated groups? Is there a need for strategic reassessment of the successes and failures of U.S. counterterrorism policy in the post-Iraq strategic environment, not only in the military and intelligence fields but also in foreign policy, law enforcement, international cooperation, public diplomacy, foreign aid, homeland security, and elsewhere? Are there places where U.S. policies in a given area are now no longer meeting the challenge, are potentially counterproductive, or where funding is inadequate or misplaced? How will the U.S. occupation of Iraq affect the changing regional terrorist threat? To what degree will regime change in Iraq alter the overall international terrorist threat to the United States at home and abroad? Will progress, or the lack thereof, in achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and resolving sensitive issues such as the conflicts in Kashmir, southern Philippines, Chechnya, and elsewhere affect Al Qaeda's prospects?

²⁷ Aum Shinrikyo is a good example of an organization that executed its most spectacular attack — the 1995 sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway — as the police were closing in.